



ACT Success: Good Grades, Not Test Practice

You want to go to college and earn scholarships, so you know you need to do well on the ACT. Maybe you think: “I’ll worry about that when I’m a junior.” Or, “I’ll just take a test prep course and I’ll learn all the tricks that will help me get a top score.”

But guess what? Doing well on this high-stakes test is not about tricks or strategies. It’s not about spending a few months as a junior drilling through practice tests in class.

It IS about getting good grades and working hard in all of your classes—starting in your freshman year.

Sounds obvious, right? But many students don’t see the connection between ACT scores and classwork. They don’t always realize that colleges rely on this test because it tells them who has the skills needed to succeed in college classes. And in today’s economy, the same skills you need for college will help you succeed in the workforce. Those skills include interpreting complex reading materials, analyzing data, paying attention to detail, solving difficult problems and writing well. This is what the ACT tests.

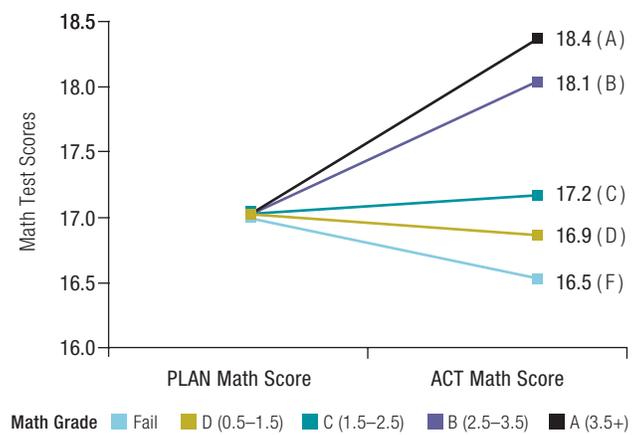
Researchers at the University of Chicago—the Consortium on Chicago School Research—have spent years trying to understand what it takes to get Chicago students ready for college. We wanted to know why students’ ACT scores are so low, even though they are so motivated to do well.

□ This is what we discovered:

- Regardless of whether they start with high or low test scores, students who earn As and Bs in their classes make big gains in a short period of time—in some subjects, a point or more in just six months.
- Juniors who barely pass with Cs and Ds either make no progress in their scores moving from the PLAN to ACT, or they fall behind.
- The average ACT math score for Chicago students is 17.2, but research has determined that students need to score at least a 22 to have a good chance of succeeding in a first-year college math course.

Figure 1

Students with higher grades in their eleventh-grade courses made larger improvements from PLAN to ACT



Note: The same patterns exist in science, English, and reading, and regardless of students’ PLAN score. Students who get As and Bs in their eleventh-grade class get better scores on the ACT than other students who had the same PLAN score but did not do as well in their class.

“I know I’m not prepared. Last year in geometry I didn’t pay too much attention, and I wish I would have now because I would just sit there like, wow, I don’t know this stuff.”

— Eleventh grader talking about geometry review

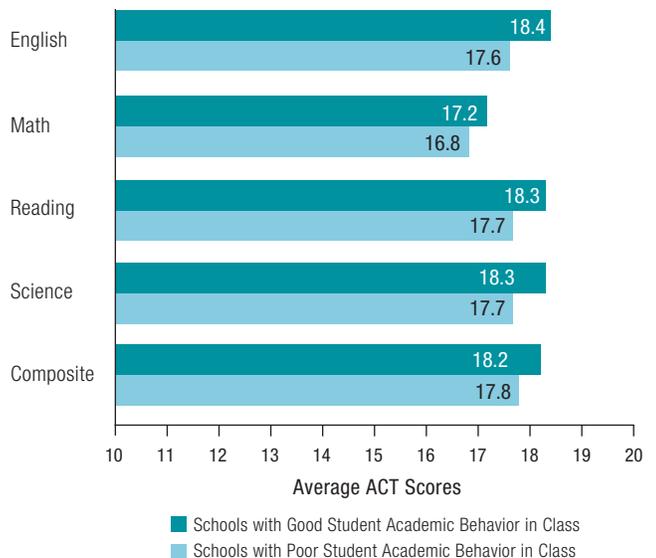
Students are training for the ACT in a last-minute “sprint,” but you need to think of it more as a “long-distance run” requiring years of hard work:

- There are no magic shortcuts to a good ACT score. Some 83 percent of juniors surveyed believe ACT scores are primarily determined by test-taking skills. This is just not true!
- It does help to take at least one full-length timed practice ACT test so you become familiar with the content and pacing of the exam. If this is not offered at school, try to do this on your own through an online program or books offered in the library.
- Don’t rely on a retake. Only half of students who retake the ACT get a better score; many get a lower score.

Figure 2

ACT scores are highest in schools where students attend class, do homework, bring supplies and pay attention

Teachers’ Reports of Students’ Behavior in Their Class



Note: This analysis statistically removes differences based on students’ background and prior test scores.

□ So...what can you do?

- ✓ **Work hard in your classes**—come to every class, pay attention, participate and do your homework to the best of your ability. You develop your college skills by working in your classes. In the long run, you lose out when you get easy assignments or you do just enough work for a passing grade.
- ✓ **ACT scores improve the more** that students write and revise papers, debate ideas about readings, draw conclusions from data, and think of different ways to solve a problem. Take classes that challenge you.
- ✓ **Learning does not just occur in your classes.** Join book clubs or the debate team. Read nonfiction and volunteer at museums. Ask adults what you can do to get ready for college.

“It was hard. I thought it would be a little easier because of the practice test that we had taken before. (But) the problems on the actual tests looked way more complicated.”

— Eleventh-grade student after taking the ACT